

Shinran's Treatment of Violence

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The Primary Issue of Violence in Shinran

Modern discussions of violence and nonviolence often turn on a quest for binding rules of conduct, rooted in comprehensive norms or ideals that dictate appropriate behavior in specific situations. As Charles Taylor has indicated in his essay, "The Perils of Moralism," "a great deal of effort in modern liberal society is invested in defining and applying codes of conduct" (347). He further notes the widespread assumption that such a code "can be generated from a single source or principle," such as a "mode of calculation of utility" or "some form of universality." In the secularized world of contemporary moral theory, we seek some general, unitary standard that will enable a common calculus by which to establish proper action and codes of conduct. In this way we will be able to foster a stable, just society free of coercion and violence.

Religious traditions are often understood to have served in the past to provide such basic principles and mores, underpinning the common social order. In Buddhist tradition, the notion of karma and the various formulations of virtues and precepts for monastics and laity may be seen to have offered such support. Recent efforts by practitioners to reinterpret and restate the six paramitas or the five precepts in contemporary terms reflects the interest in conventions and codes that Taylor identifies.

Shinran's treatment of violence may be construed as precisely the opposite of modern liberal discourse in orientation. It is a reasoned effort to deconstruct certain key assumptions underlying modern notions of a universally prescriptive code of action. Most fundamentally, Shinran's views are at odds with modern humanistic confidence in the autonomous agency of the individual and its powers of moral judgment and action. Thus, he would also reject common notions of the steady advance of civilization and its social organization.

This is not to say that Shinran is resigned to a gloomy rejection of the world, for he offers an alternative paradigm. His entire concern—regarding the past, the present, and the future—lies with this world of samsaric existence and its living beings, not in a disparate other-worldly existence, and he repeatedly expresses his own present joy in having encountered the dharma, so that already his "thoughts and feelings flow within the dharma-ocean" (CWS I: 303). Regarding the stance of persons of the nembutsu, he comments to a close disciple being questioned by the

authorities, 'Those who feel that their own birth is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha's benevolence, hold the nembutsu in their hearts and say it to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's teaching spread!"' (*Goshōsokushū*, Letter 2, CWS I: 560).

Nevertheless, instead of delineating standards of virtuous conduct by which to judge life in society, Shinran seeks to open up another, encompassing and overlapping dimension for gaining perspective on moral issues, one in which our usual judgments of good and bad action emerge ever relativized and contextualized by awareness of broader standpoints.

For this presentation, I will focus on words of Shinran from one section of *Tannishō* and from several letters. These disclose his basic stance in confronting the issues of violence in human life and in his own experience. His personal situation throughout his years of propagation activity must, of course, be seen to have been extremely constrained and limited in opportunity—a defrocked and formerly exiled priest; openly married even while wearing monk's robes ("neither monk nor lay"); living as a preacher in the countryside, but of a periodically suppressed teaching. Nevertheless, the general structure of his thinking holds significant lessons for our own construal of moral judgments and issues of violence today.

At the outset, it should be noted that Shinran was fiercely critical of the powers that dominated society, including both court and temple institutions. He concludes a section of hymns for ordinary laypeople with the note, "It is saddening to see the behavior of monks of the major temples and monastic complexes at present, whether high-ranking monks or 'teachers of dharma'" (*The Collected Works of Shinran*, CWS I: 424), and during World War II, his denunciation of an "enraged" emperor and his court ministers for "violating human rectitude" (CWS I: 289) in his major work, *Kyōgyōshō monrui*, was censured by the government authorities.

For Shinran, however, the basic issues regarding violence from a Pure Land Buddhist perspective center on a false understanding of self as substantial and transcendent. He perceives violence as the outcome of the fundamental ignorance that gives rise to anger, aversion, and ego-attachment. Consequently, the resolution of problems of violence must lie in the arising of insight into the nature of self. The hallmark of Shinran's thought is that the rectifying and shaping of conduct in itself can never be effective in achieving such awareness, and mere mimicking of right conduct can lead to the reinforcement of ego-assertion. It is for this reason that he rejects moral codes and disciplines.

Thus, while discussions of such moral issues as violence are commonly concerned with

establishing foundational universal principles from which specific rules may be derived, in the passages we will look at, Shinran treats problems of violence not discursively, but in dialogical and narrative form. This is because violence is not overcome by preaching adherence to traditional moral imperatives. Rather, movement toward resolution of conflict can occur when the teaching is heard in a way that guides listeners to a vantage point from which their own stances become apparent. It is thus that old attachments may be loosened, anger mollified, and new configurations of resolution may emerge. It requires a shift of perspective or a rupture of conventional thinking and apprehension that may occur in dialogic engagement, as a temporal process. For Shinran, engagement with the Pure Land path relativizes the field of moral judgment by showing the self as temporal, situated, and self-attached. It is in this way that the presuppositions of the self can be exposed and problematized, even though not transcended.

The Elucidation of Agency: Reading *Tannishō* 13

The central concern raised in *Tannishō* 13 is the effort to contain the working of the Vow within the framework of an encompassing moral order. In this way, one may seek to “tame” or domesticate the dimension within which the Vow functions with radical equality. Although *Tannishō* 13 is seen to parallel *Tannishō* 3—often branded with the slogan *akunin shōki* and cited as the core of Shinran’s Buddhism—and both are commonly understood in moral terms (‘the evil person is the object of salvation’), Shinran’s basic issue is the understanding of self. At bottom, the problem turns on the assertion of notions of autonomous agency and its primacy as the final determining factor in religious attainment. This is, in fact, precisely Shinran’s interpretation of “doubt” (“believing in [the recompense of] evil and good, people aspire to be born in the Pure Land through cultivating the root of good,” “Chapter on Transformed Buddhas and Lands,” §7) which indicates the failure to realize *shinjin* 信心.

In *Tannishō* 13, the compiler Yuien-bō adopts the strategy of first defusing, then embracing, an expression intended as a derogatory label. He begins with the term *hongan-bokori* (“presumption or imposition upon the Primal Vow”), a highly charged condemnation of practitioners who “are unafraid of committing evil because of the inconceivable working of the Primal Vow.” The criticism is of nembutsu practitioners who take a lax attitude toward their own breaches of morality, comfortable in the notion that Amida’s Vow works to save them whatever evil they may have committed. Such lack of concern about the consequences of wrongdoing might border on an

antinomianism and would surely continue to grate on our moral sensibilities today.

Yuien's intent, however, is to highlight two intertwined problems underlying the denunciation of others for "*hongan-bokori*." He states that such criticism is rooted in a form of doubt concerning the salvific working of the vow (it will not save certain kinds of people), and further, it results from a failure to understand the working of karma. In each case, he refers to words of Shinran that have a bearing on the topic, but we must assume that the overall structure of the presentation is Yuien's.

Although the two problems Yuien indicates appear quite distinct, they may be seen to have the same root: a misunderstanding of the nature of the self. They both presuppose an autonomous subject that holds the power to stand apart from its circumstances and to freely determine its actions. Both are aspects of the belief in the individual responsibility of the personal agent for his or her own actions. They do not recognize another dimension that both transcends and inhabits our usual world.

Doubt

To begin, doubt should be understood not merely as an intellectual questioning of the existence or effectiveness of Amida's Primal Vow. It has to do with a failure to distinguish between two dimensions or spheres of existence. For convenience, we may adopt as a kind of shorthand the coordinates of horizontal and vertical. Further, we can refer to Nishida Kitarō's concise formulation:

However great it may be, human wisdom is human wisdom, human virtue human virtue. It is no different from the angles of a triangle, however long its sides, equaling to right angles. Yet when a person, once undergoing a complete turnabout, abandons this wisdom and this virtue, he or she can attain new wisdom, take on new virtue, and enter into new life. This is the living marrow of religion. (Nishida, "Gutoku Shinran")

The horizontal encompasses normal everyday life in society, including all its values, moral judgments, and interactions. The vertical is the transcendent.

Perhaps what is most characteristic of Shinran's thought is the sharp line that he draws between endeavor on the horizontal plane and movement along the vertical. This is because the horizontal is precisely that realm of thought and perception circumscribed by false discrimination

and the ignorance of ego-attachment. For Shinran, movement along the vertical plane can only originate from outside the self, in movements of genuine wisdom-compassion. Thus, as Nishida notes,

Shin is . . . religion that has taken the foolish person and the evil person for its true occasion. Christianity, which developed from Judaism, is likewise an other-power religion centered upon love, but within it the concept of righteousness is still strong and there is a certain disposition to condemn evil. Shin, however, differs from this in being religion of absolute love, absolute Other Power. (Nishida, "Gutoku Shinran")

"Absolute" here indicates the clear-cut distinction between horizontal and vertical in Shinran. In other words, no act of good undertaken on the horizontal plane moves one along the vertical, and no act of violence and "no evil can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow."

This is a difficult assertion to make in modern Western liberal society, and Shin and other forms of Japanese Buddhism are often seen as deficient in moral guidance. Nishida's sense that "the concept of righteousness is still strong" in Christian thinking is affirmed by Charles Taylor using language close to ours: "Christian faith . . . always places our actions in two dimensions, one of right action, and also an eschatological dimension" (350). Again, a paradigm of two dimensions is invoked, but we can see by comparison the distinctiveness of Shinran's thought.

Taylor sees the tension between the horizontal dimension of right action and the vertical eschatological dimension as having undergone historical changes in the West that have resulted in 'a kind of "code fetishism," or nomolatriy' (351) in modern times. He traces this back to "a turn in Latin Christendom": "The attempt was always to make people over as more perfect practicing Christians, through articulating codes and inculcating disciplines. Until the Christian life became more and more identified with these codes and disciplines" (351). Concomitantly, 'Christianity was shorn of much of its "transcendent" content' as the vertical dimension collapsed into the horizontal. Finally, Taylor notes that modern "disbelief in God arises in close symbiosis with . . . belief in a moral order of rights-bearing individuals, who are destined (by God or Nature) to act for mutual benefit" (352).

Whether or not the transition Taylor outlines is historically accurate, it provides a paradigm against which Shinran's thought can be easily grasped. (Later interest in the codification of proper religious conduct in Shin tradition may in fact offer parallels to the model Taylor offers for

Christianity.) Shinran's thought is a decisive move in precisely the opposite direction, denying any significance for advance along the vertical dimension to virtuous conduct, adherence to precepts, or religious discipline in themselves. In this way, the vertical dimension emerges as utterly distinct from the coordinates and calculus of endeavor in ordinary life. This occurs, however, conjointly with the awareness that Yuien indicates in the second half of his statement of the issue: the failure to understand the influence of karma.

Karma

Yuien begins his exposition section with comments on karma. Although this passage is usually interpreted to mean that even the smallest act of evil is karmically determined, it is clear that in Yuien's understanding, both good and evil acts—all our conduct—is karmically conditioned. Thus, it may be more in accord with Shinran's meaning to read the passage: "Know that [an act] even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit's fur or sheep's wool is [conditioned by] past karma of evil that is done." While this may appear deterministic, it expresses two central elements of Shinran's thinking relevant to his attitude toward violence:

(1) For Shinran, all human action is conditioned by past karma, but the significance is that, though we may assume the autonomy of agency and the freedom of self-determination, in fact our thinking, perception, and action are situated in innumerable ways—culturally, socially, historically. Above all, our immersion in samsaric existence means that our karmically conditioned actions tend strongly to bind us to further samsara. In words that Yuien quotes as Shinran's, "If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act." Further, in an allusion to the tale of Angulimala: "A person may not wish to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people."

(2) Further, all acts that arise from ignorance and self-attachment, and which therefore function karmically to bind us to further samsaric existence, are by definition tainted by evil in Shinran's usage. Good in its true sense can only signify what holds the power to move one toward awakening, or toward the dissolution of the false reification of self. Thus he can state: "From the very beginning sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real, a heart of purity, for they are possessed of defilements, evil, and wrong views" (CWS I:), or "I know nothing at all of [genuine] good or evil. . . . with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real" (CWS I:). Only the nembutsu, that is,

harbors the seeds of awakening. In such statements, there lies an opening up of a dimension beyond the horizons of ongoing life in society.

The Transformation of Self-Awareness

Shinran understands engagement with the Pure Land path as a process of deepening self-awareness, with consequences for moral conduct. In letters later collected in *Mattōshō*, Shinran sketches the process. These letters were intended for followers in the Kanto region at a time when many were being misled by what Shinran viewed as a flawed and harmful nembutsu teaching. In the letters, we find Shinran admonishing people who “distort the teaching, having heard that no evil obstructs the attainment of birth.” Such people “say that one may follow one’s desires in any way whatever,” “with the excuse that one is by nature possessed of blind passions.” This is the self-indulgent utilization of the teaching as an excuse for immoral conduct.

What is relevant to our concerns here, however, is the unfolding process of awareness itself, and how it can occur at all. Of our ordinary life, Shinran writes:

Human beings are such that, maddened by the passions of greed, we desire to possess; maddened by the passions of anger, we hate that which should not be hated, seeking to go against the law of cause and effect; led astray by the passions of ignorance, we do what should not even be thought. (*Mattōshō* 19, CWS I: 550)

Shinran employs such metaphors as madness, drunkenness, or being poisoned to characterize the life of ignorance, driven by afflicting passions. This is life enclosed within the boundaries of the horizontal dimension. In Shinran’s thinking, encounter with the Pure Land teaching awakens people to the nature of this life, for it introduces a different dimension, the dimension of the real, which is unattainable by any act or accomplishment in the condition of ignorance. Thus,

When people first begin to hear the Buddha’s Vow, they wonder, having become thoroughly aware of the karmic evil in their hearts and minds, how they will ever attain birth [in the Pure Land] as they are. To such people we teach that since we are possessed of blind passions, the Buddha receives us without judging whether our hearts are good or bad. When, upon hearing this, a person’s trust in the Buddha has grown

deep, he or she comes to abhor such a self and to lament continued existence in birth-and-death. (*Mattōshō* 20, CWS I: 553)

To continue with our broad paradigm, the nembutsu practitioner comes to see herself as engaged in the two distinct dimensions of horizontal (samsaric existence) and vertical. In Shinran's thinking, the horizontal includes all the values, aspirations, and codes in which our ordinary life in society is immersed; the vertical enables a broad purchase on the horizontal, but no removal from it. Moreover, this is not a static condition, but embodies an ongoing transformation:

Formerly you were drunk with the wine of ignorance and had a liking only for the three poisons of greed, anger, and folly, but since you have begun to hear the Buddha's Vow you have gradually awakened from the drunkenness of ignorance, gradually rejected the three poisons, and come to prefer at all times the medicine of Amida Buddha. (*Mattōshō* 20, 553)

Further, according to Shinran, the deepening of self-awareness, including the emergence of the thorough falsity of the reified and self-attached self, manifests itself in the everyday life of the person of nembutsu.

Implications of Shinran's Thinking

As is well known, in Shinran, *shinjin* "has no root" in a person's existence, but is the Buddha-mind that is given to beings. It may be said to correspond to what we have indicated as the vertical dimension of existence. While ignorance and afflicting passions characterize a person's karmic existence, one also comes to attain or realize *shinjin*.

We see here that Shinran holds a conception of mind that differs fundamentally from modern commonsense notions that persons "possess" minds, that the mind, as all one's psychological functioning, somehow resides within one as the substantive core of oneself as person. Such thinking is the seed of the notion of individual agency we have referred to before.

Shinran's conception of mind is twofold or doubled, and it is with the emergence of the mind of *shinjin* and the nature of ordinary, ego-centric awareness emerges to apprehension. Regarding *shinjin*, Shinran states:

Buddha-nature (true reality, dharma-body, dharma-nature, suchness, oneness) is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood. Since it is with this heart and mind of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of the dharma-body as compassionate means, this *shinjin* is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. (CWS I: 461)

The opening or emergence of the vertical dimension as realization of *shinjin*, and movement along the vertical dimension toward broader perspectives on any horizontal, functions to rupture the presupposition of transcendent subjectivity within the world of horizontal interactions and to disrupt any imposition of an autonomous, individual, righteous perspective. Mind does not belong to the self, but pervades all beings.

Shinran speaks of the consequences of such religious attainment in concrete, personal terms, based on his experience within the confines of his own situation:

Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth can be seen in the change in the heart that had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practicers. (*Mattōshō* 19, CWS I: 551)

Further, in response to the violence and suppression he has experienced, he quotes the words of Shandao to give broad historical perspective:

The time has come when the five defilements increase

and those who doubt and revile [Amida's Vow] are numerous.

Both monks and lay people despise [the nembutsu] and refuse to listen [to the teaching].

When they see those who practice it, the poison of anger arises in them;

Hindering others in every way, they vie in causing harm. . . . (*Goshōsokushū* 5, CWS I: 565-566)

Further, he speaks of the response that arises from the doubled awareness that we have

considered:

Those people, described here as such, perform deeds that will bring about the suppression of the nembutsu and act out of malice toward people of the nembutsu. In this regard, without bearing any ill will toward such persons, you should keep in mind the thought that, saying the nembutsu, you are to help them.

The people who are trying to obstruct the nembutsu are the manor lords, bailiffs, and landowners in the local areas. . . . Teachers of the past have stated that practitioners of the nembutsu should act with compassion for those who commit such obstruction, feel pity for them, and earnestly say the nembutsu, thereby helping those who seek to hinder them. (*Goshōsokushū* 4, CWS I: 563-564)

In the face of malice and intimidation, Shinran's response of kindheartedness and nonviolence arises precisely from the doubled consciousness that he delineates. It is thus pervaded simultaneously by compassion that is the unfolding of the Buddha's action as the nembutsu, not one's own agency, and gratitude that, like the awareness transmitted down through the tradition, pervades but does not issue from one's own subjectivity.